

How Do We Interpret the Parables and Miracles of Jesus?

Dr Gerard Hall sm

Why Parables?

In three Gospels, it is reported that the disciples asked Jesus directly: "Why do you speak in parables?" He answers: "I speak in parables so that they may look but not see, listen but not hear or understand" (Mk.4:10-12). It is, however, highly unlikely that Jesus set out to be so deliberately obfuscating. This tells us more about the early Christian communities seeking to understand the reason for Jesus' rejection. It is a good example of what Wrede calls the "messianic secret" in Mark's Gospel.

So, then, are the parables moral example stories in which Jesus makes ethical points about how to live a good life? Luke's Jesus does precisely this when, at the conclusion to his parable of the **Good Samaritan** (10:29-37), he tells his listeners: "Go and do likewise." That is, treat other human beings as your neighbour in line with the admonition that we should love our neighbour as ourselves. Love is reflected in actions, and the loving actions of the Samaritan, unlike the selfishness of the priest and the Levite, are to be imitated.

Parables play on the relationship between the familiar and the strange; they reverse our ordinary way of experiencing the world and shock us into a type of reversed consciousness. Parables induce us to look at our lives and make a decision about our futures.

Interpreting Parables

What is a Parable? (C. H. Dodd)	Three-Stage Pattern of Parable (J. D. Crossan)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• a simile or metaphor• drawn from everyday life or from nature• holds attention by its vividness or strangeness• its meaning is open-ended and left to its hearers to grasp in their own situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Advent (what people expect)• Reversal of expectation (what Jesus says)• New vision and action (how people must change)

Reinterpreting Parables

Viewed in this light, the parables of the **Good Samaritan** and the Pharisee and the Publican (Lk.18:9-14) are deeply subversive. Jewish people in Jesus' day had clear ideas about virtue and prayer: priests and Levites are virtuous; God hears the prayers of good people such as Pharisees. What we find, however, is that Jesus reverses the plots: it is the low-class Samaritan

foreigner who is virtuous; God hears the prayer of the publican sinner. More shocking still: the actions of the 'holy' priest and Levite are sinful; the prayer of the 'virtuous' Pharisee is unsuccessful. Evidently, the initial hearers of these parables are shocked. It is understandable that even members of Jesus' own family began to think he was mad. The parables force their hearers into making a decision about Jesus and about themselves.

The parables of Jesus take this unexpected turn and, in so doing, reinforce the way Jesus performs his ministry, mixes with women, talks to foreigners and eats with outcasts. So when, for example, Jesus tells the parable of the Great Banquet (Lk.14:15-24) in which all the outsiders are welcomed to the meal at the expense of the invited guests, this resembles the kind of table-fellowship that Jesus himself practices. The confrontation is double: not only are Jesus' actions a notable reversal of the accepted conventions of his day; he is now suggesting through word and parable that only those who act this way are worthy of the reign of God.

Then there are the **Lost and Found parables** (sheep, pearls, coins) [Mtt.13:44-46; 18:10-14]. At one level, these are earthy, common-sense stories that draw the hearer into a familiar and plausible situation. What we then notice is the way the details become vivid, distorted, exaggerated. For example, leaving a flock of ninety-nine hapless sheep to fend for themselves would not be countenanced by any guild of shepherds. However, the shepherd in Jesus' story does precisely this. Who, then, is this reckless shepherd? The searcher for the kingdom? Or is it God who is reckless in searching for us? This is where the open-ended meaning of parables becomes evident. There is no single interpretation. Jesus leaves it to his listeners to decide.

Jesus' parables are all about shattering accepted social values, moral attitudes, common behaviours, religious practices and human prejudices. When this occurs, the reign of God is given space to grow as in the parables of the Mustard Seed or the Yeast (Mtt.13:31-33). Jesus' radical sayings function in a similar manner. They jolt the hearer into making a response. Evidently, the reign of God is closely allied to people changing their vision of what it is to be human. Some find all this too much and, as predicted in the story of the rich young man, walk sadly away. To hear the message of the parables and radical sayings is to experience something of God's kingship in the world of the here-and-now--and to change accordingly.

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